

Werner Erhard: “All I can do is lie.”

This article is reprinted from the
September 1974 issue of the East West Journal.

100% recycled paper

Werner Erhard:

"All I can do is lie."

est is an acronym for *Erhard Seminars Training*. Centered in San Francisco, Trainings are also conducted in Los Angeles, Honolulu, Aspen and New York. There are over 24,000 graduates.

The heart of the Training is delivered on two consecutive weekends, both Saturday and Sunday, all day and most of the evening. There is a long Wednesday night meeting before the first weekend, another after the second. Trainees are asked to refrain from using drugs, alcohol, coffee or anything other than essential medications during this two week period.

Werner Erhard is a sparkling human being: casually but impeccably dressed; vibrant body, energy pouring from a virtually inexhaustable well. He speaks articulately, candidly; there is no mistaking his honesty, intelligence and sincerity.

EWJ: What is est?

Erhard: *est* is a 60-hour experience which opens an additional dimension of living to your awareness. The Training is designed to transform the level at which you experience life so that living becomes a process of expanding satisfaction.

Another part of the answer to that question is that there is not an answer. *est* actually is an experience. But if you go around telling people that, you won't have anything to talk about and you need something to say about it. It is a very individual experience. And because of that, it's something that is created by the individual. In other words, *est* is not created by me or the trainer or the group that the person goes to train with; it's an experience — like all experiences — which is created by the individual who is experiencing the experience. Now what you and I normally call experience is that stuff that comes in from the outside, but that is part of the experience which I call *non-experience*. It has its clear counterpart, the other part we don't pay much attention to. Because we do not pay much attention to it, we think the inner part is the outer part, but the way I see it is the other way around: the outer part is an effect of the inner part and the cause of the inner part is the individual self. My notion is that what happens in the Training is that the individual is given an opportunity to create original experi-

ences, or to re-create original experiences — experiences which that individual originally created. That individual created himself, and in the Training, he gets an opportunity to re-experience the fact that he created himself.

EWJ: All the est material we've read refers to a personality change. It's useful to control personality, to be able to play the game. We all created our personalities by assimilating influences from the outside world. Some people believe, however, that reality of our inner world is our "essence" which was not created by man, but by God, and is the so-called "true self." I have not seen any reference to "essence" in contrast to personality in the est literature. How does the process of change relate to "essence" in the est Training?

Erhard: To pay attention to personality is to pay attention to an illusion or effects. The *spirit* is the bomb. If you pay attention to spirit the same way you pay attention to personality, you would have the same bullshit. In other words, if you put the truth into the system in which you cradled the lie, the truth becomes a lie. A very simple way of saying that is, the truth believed is a lie. If you go around telling the truth you are lying. The horrible part about it is that the truth is so damn believable, you get people to believe it a lot.

EWJ: You're talking about just telling the truth, as opposed to living the truth?

Erhard: For instance, I believe that the "belief" in God is the greatest barrier to God in the Universe — the single greatest barrier. I would prefer someone who is ignorant to someone who believes in God. Because the belief in God is a total barrier, almost a total barrier, to the experience of God. So if I am going to lie, which I am, because that's all I can do with my mouth, I would rather lie about lies than to lie about truths. The Training isn't a set of precepts or concepts or notions; it isn't anything we tell people in the Training — that is very clearly pointed out in the Training. It is the experience that the person has of himself... I would like to leave it right there. So to answer your question directly, I don't speak about "essence" or talk about "per-

sonality" because I don't want to damage the thing I am trying to get to.

EWJ: When you say belief in God are you equating that with the desire to attain God?

Erhard: It's not equal to, it is a part of. A belief in God is fundamentally a way of knowing things. Now, if I had met your wife, then I have a different way of knowing her than if I tried to figure out what kind of woman you are married to. I have some kind of direct experience. Belief in God is this way. And the problem with this is that it is hypnotic and it is very hip.

EWJ: One of your brochures says, "est will not interfere with meditation, religion or any other discipline. est is not like any of these experiences." Is it like anything that we know?

Erhard: I will have to answer you on a couple of levels. If I tell you the truth, the answer is no, except that stops the conversation. The mind works by identification. You are a man, my father was a man; therefore in order to deal with you, I have to deal with the you the same way I dealt with my father. That is the way of the mind; it works by identification. There is something that goes on beyond the mind, where you have just a being. The being discerns, it differentiates, but here's the trap: I have to say something so that a being and a mind can get something about a *being* alone. But they can't. There is no sense talking to people about beingness as long as they have a mind, because the mind will subvert what you say into its own model. And the mind works with symbols, it does not work with direct experience. So if you talk to a being and its mind about beingness, no matter what you say, it is a lie. Because that mind will symbolize and systematize what it is that you convey. Now, if you blow somebody's mind, you can quickly slip in some data about being; but you don't really slip in any data, because the being knows. It just says, "I've got it."

EWJ: Is est a way past the mind or a new way of using it?

Erhard: No, it's definitely a way past the mind. It transcends the mind. Actually, what I would really say — because I think it communicates better than anything, although it is not totally accurate — is that it blows the mind.

EWJ: It blows the Ego, too?

Erhard: Well, that is one of the few pieces of information I have that is worthwhile. People keep saying, "write a book." But everything that I know has already been said and it hasn't worked. It hasn't worked by being *said*. What works is the individual experience. There is one thing that I have discovered that I think might be worthwhile — not worth much, but nothing that one says is worth much — and that is that I am very clear what Ego is. I think that the people who are interested in Ego, or Ego Strength or Ego Reduction or Ego whatever, would be well off to be clear about what Ego *is*... it is the mind in operation under a specific circumstance where the mind thinks that the being *is* the mind. That is all Ego is, and the 25,000 books written in Western psychology about Ego are confusing and the 40,000 the Hindus have written are even more confusing.

EWJ: At this point, are there any books, tapes or records available on what est Training is about?

Erhard: No, I refrain from writing because I want it clearly understood that what I have is not what I have to say.

EWJ: It's what you are?

Erhard: Yes, but it is a bit beyond that, because what I am may not be of great value to you. What the Training does is create the space for people. Now an old word for that might have been "freedom." The psychiatric word for that is "permission." (I think all those words are inadequate because they all come out of a model which is folding.)

Let me define "space" very quickly. "From here" is not space. It is distance. From here to the very edge of the universe is not space, it's distance. And what the physicists call space is actually distance. Space is that medium in which distance exists, actually where everything exists. Space is not measurable, it is only experienceable. You can only experience space; distance you can measure. The physicists deal with distance and kind of ruin physics a little bit by calling it space. I've had an opportunity to deal with some philosophers of science and some theoretical physicists. They are the easiest people in the whole world to talk to about est Training, because they dig immediately that they are not dealing with space, that they are dealing with distance. They dig immediately that they are not dealing with energy and matter, that the so-called energy/matter spectrum is not matter and energy at all. That is a true lie and what they are dealing with

is form, called matter and energy in physics, but as soon as you point it out to them, they get it immediately. They can see that physics has never touched any substance, that substance is not measurable, only form is measurable.

Substance is spiritual to use the word, and space is spiritual and distance is personality/physical and form is personality/physical. I don't want to write a book because I don't want people to get stuck with the forms and distances. Someday I will write a book on communications, because I think I have something the saying of which is of some value. I think there is very little to say which is of value. I gave up reading about 10 years ago. I love books though. I am an absolute book freak. I cannot get by a book store without buying a book. I really am a nut about books. In fact, I

towards the source of it. So I would say that est puts you in a permanent meditation state. For me, that is exactly what happens when the Training is over. After the Training is over, you are in more direct contact with your experience of what is so and you are always oriented towards the source of the experience.

EWJ: Does est teach any particular meditation or chanting techniques? Or does the essence of est get you so into yourself that your daily living becomes better?

Erhard: There are some techniques that we give in the Training, but we attempt to soft pedal them or quickly get off them. Every once in a while, people will ask us for one and we will give them one if they press hard enough, because we feel that not giving them makes them special and people will want them even more. I don't think techniques are where it's really at.

EWJ: Here is another phrase that comes from one of your brochures: "The only person you encounter is yourself. You need to discover your own point of view, rather than have it impressed upon you by others."

Erhard: est is trying to accomplish what is already so. And if that is understood totally, you then could understand why it doesn't take 20 years, it takes four days. Actually the four days are wasted. It happens like that (snaps fingers). It doesn't even happen in time. It happens outside of time. But I ain't there yet, so I have to pound away at it for four days. The importance of what I have just said is, what est contends is already so. Therefore, it is the experience of what is already so that the Training is about. So that shouldn't be too difficult really, all you have to do is to get people to stop thinking they are the body ("thinking" is a wrong word — "identifying with" is better).

So the de-identification happens at all levels. The person de-identifies with his mind, de-identifies with his body, he de-identifies with his emotions, he de-identifies with his problems, he de-identifies with his maya, he begins to see that he is not the Play. It is going on. The thing I told you about Ego, I consider to be a fairly important piece of information. I think that using that, people will understand the whole bit about consciousness. That piece of information can really produce some good results.

The other piece of information which I think can be of some value — I've never been able to communicate this in any way I have ever been satisfied with — I



can't think of anything else I am really addicted to. And I have really gotten over having to read them. I love tables of contents. I can truly read a book from the table of contents, most of the time. Because there is the essential truth. And a book is a form of that, if it has any value at all.

EWJ: Perhaps you can write a book on what est isn't.

Erhard: We do in est what you might call a directed meditation. I don't think anybody knows what meditation really is. The yogis have the same problems that any of us have. They see green, and somebody else sees some other color. For me, meditation is to be aware of what is so —

"est is trying to accomplish what is already so. And if that is understood totally, you then could understand why it doesn't take 20 years. It takes four days."

have a sense it's going to come out here. Without knowing the name of the Play you can *find out* that you aren't the Play, but you can't experience that you are not the Play. And the name of the play is *Survival!* That is the name of the drama. And it is not until . . . that is about as far as I am going to be able to go or I'm going to ruin the rest of it. So just let me identify with the fact that I'm going to ruin it, because I want to explain it and it takes eight hours to explain it and I have to do it in about three minutes . . . Survival is translated in everyday affairs, as dominance and the avoidance of dominance. This takes us back to that other question: the reason I have avoided using the word "essence" or any reference to that whole area is that the people who are interested in essence are attempting to survive. They are in the drama. The part of the drama that they are playing is that they are trying to dominate the drama. Which is as much Ego as any other Ego game. That's the drama. That's survival. If you are trying to get away from the dominance of your desires, that's an Ego game.

EWJ: That's desire in itself.

Erhard: For sure. It's part of the drama. See, that's my problem with "spiritual people". They have handled the drama by avoiding it. And you can't get out of the drama that way, because the avoidance of the drama is part of the drama. What you have to do is confront the essence of the drama. You don't need to confront the essence of yourself. If you confront the essence of the drama, that's all you've got, yourself. Self is all there is. I mean, that's it. We are trying to accomplish what is already so, that's why it is so easy. What is already so is . . . you are. It is like the three Hindu wise men arguing and the first one said "God is everything." And everyone thought that was fabulous. What a tremendous statement. I mean, that is really the essence of everything. Then the other guy stood up and said "God is." That was obviously the winner. The third man stood up and said "God." I mean, that was it. And everything really is that way,

you know. Where isn't God?

EWJ: Then you and Ram Dass say the same thing?

Erhard: That is a very interesting thing. I went to hear Ram Dass. He came over to the house and we had a discussion and I really love the guy. I think he is fabulous, I really think he is fabulous. I went to hear him and it was just incredible the stuff that he says that is absolutely the Training in words.

EWJ: I hear him, I hear you?

Erhard: Yep, it is just amazing.

EWJ: I am interested in that phrase that came through referring to the trouble that you have with "spiritual" people. Does it imply that people who have a heavy spiritual background of one sort or another do not come to est or what?

Erhard: Oh, no. As a matter of fact, the heart of est is spiritual people, really. You see, I don't know anyone who is not spiritual. I spent 13 years earning my living in the business jungle. And that is where I learned about spirituality. You see, I think there is not anything *but* spirituality. So when you try to identify something that is more spiritual than something else, it is a lie. That's all there is, there isn't anything but spirituality, which is just another word for God, because God is everything. When I say I have a problem with spiritual people, I really shouldn't be saying that because I really don't have any problem with them. Being spiritual is just . . . being spiritual. Of course, I think *not* being spiritual is also being spiritual.

EWJ: Somebody into a heavy discipline might theoretically come to est and take est without ever dropping their discipline and after est continue their discipline. Does this ever happen?

Erhard: We trained a ghetto chief. Now ghetto chiefism is a very heavy discipline. I mean, it is as heavy as Zen ever thought of being. About half-way through the Training, Arthur (the chief), stood up and said, "You know, Werner, I just realized something. You are going to take all my stuff away from me. And if I go back to the ghetto, and I don't have my

stuff, I'm liable to get killed. I don't know whether I belong here or not." Anyway, Arthur took the whole Training. But that is not the point of the story. The point of the story was, by becoming detached . . . by becoming unattached to his survival mechanism, he became the cause of his behavior instead of the effect of the behavior. He became the cause of his particular kind of discipline, his practice. It's interesting because it is the same thing that has happened to Christians, same thing that has happened to Buddhists.

A lady was training in Hawaii. A devout Buddhist . . . she got about half-way through the Training and left. Could not stand the Training. Could never do it. Came back another time and she got through the Training to a point where somehow Buddha came and I told her that Buddha was "dogshit." And she started to cry. And I kept pressing that with her until she finally got that Buddha was, in fact, dogshit. And she had a total release from her belief in Buddha. And at the same instant she had the experience of Buddha. She could really tell you about the Training. Besides having that incredible experience, she has had all the disciplinary stuff that precedes the experience that then allows you to present the experience to someone else. You see, that is the only thing that I think is unusual about our own enlightenment.

My enlightenment was unusual because I had an incredible disciplinary life up until that time. I lived in the toughest monastery in the universe, called the "world," and I did it as a monastic discipline. You know, most people screw around with life. I did not screw around with it. I did not handle life strategically, I handled it *all out*. I never got enlightenment from doing it that way, incidentally. It was that discipline of working 22, 23 hours a day and sleeping one, two, three, four hours a night and being always "at it" for a period of perhaps 13 years and less intensively for a long period before that provided the "stuff" to present the space for the experience of enlightenment. It was not the enlightenment experience itself. But one without the other . . . well, you need both of them.

EWJ: Do est graduates consider you a Guru or Spiritual Master in the Eastern concept of that word?

Erhard: Almost universally no. Even where it is so they get beyond that. Just as I think that people who have a guru get beyond guruing their guru. That doesn't mean that they no longer have a guru, but

"People keep saying, 'write a book.' But everything that I know already has been said and it hasn't worked. It hasn't worked by being said. What works is the individual experience."

the relationship is different. It is not "me and the guru," "guru me."

EWJ: You do not have disciples?

Erhard: No. And if I do, I have to clean that up. I'll tell you what happens. I am a fairly charismatic guy and so are the other trainers, and est is a pretty strong movement and people who are looking to get attached to something will come and get attached. They get attached because they choose to get attached. Actually, they do not "choose" because that is a sacreligious term — they do it because they need it. The est experience allows you to become unattached from the need to be attached to somebody or a movement. It really blows that "true believer" syndrome. It is a very exciting thing to have happen. Some people get it in the middle of the Training and some people get it a year afterwards. As far as I know, it is blown for everybody.

EWJ: What were you doing for 13 years in the business jungle?

Erhard: I was doing a thing which today is called "Executive Development and Motivation" and my job was to work with people in such a way that productivity increased and leadership increased, and executive ability increased. That's what I did. Someone figured out that I spent 36,000 hours in that 13 years in one to one and group sessions, which is seven solid years, night and day, if you count it up.

EWJ: For people who don't know what "executive development and motivation" means, is it a "Dale Carnegie" type course?

Erhard: Let's make the pot a little bigger than that. Dale Carnegie, Maxwell Moltz, American Management Association, Industrial Psychology, PACE. Now the one thing that is unusual is that I was also a discipline freak. I did everything that I could find and I found stuff that nobody else found. I subjected myself, I made myself the subject of as many different disciplines as I could find. I either studied them or I practiced them or had people do them to me or I learned to do them to people or whatever.

EWJ: Various spiritual disciplines?

Erhard: Spiritual disciplines, psycho-

logical disciplines, whatever, philosophical disciplines, body disciplines.

EWJ: And all of this led to formulate what est is now?

Erhard: Yes, let me tell you why business is such a beautiful place to do that. If I had been at a university, I would have just dabbled in these things, because they were out of my department. You can't do anything serious outside of your department. Had I been in a religious order or any church or monastery, I definitely could not have done any of this. It would have been heresy. The only place you are really allowed to do things like this is business, because business doesn't care what you do as long as it isn't blatantly illegal and it produces results. So when I told the boss I was going to use Zen with the sales force, he said, "Great, don't get any on the walls." So I got a chance to take my experience in Zen and translate it from the usual setting to a new setting.

Now you and I both know that you have to get beyond testing to get to it. "It" isn't testable, but its effects are testable. Unfortunately, you are so stuck in the effects that you can't ever get to it — you've got to transcend the effects to get to it. Which, of course, I never did because I was so caught up in the effects. But it was an incredible thing, because it really separated the bullshit from the gunsmoke. You see, an incredible amount of what Swami Muktananda presents is tradition, religion, etc., and in there is that essential. A lot of people are blinded by the trappings and the things that were really beautiful about this translation of disciplines into business — you really had to find out what the hell was trappings and drop it fast.

EWJ: All right, if that did not produce est, what did?

Erhard: The enlightenment experience that I had. The direct experience of myself. One particular experience. Now, that's a lie actually, because the experience looks like this (makes a linear gesture) and what I am talking about in particular is here (draws a circle in the air)

that denies the rest of it.

EWJ: A very exalted state of consciousness, like samadhi, or like that?

Erhard: Yeah, but I don't think that I would define it quite that way. The state for me was one of total clarity. I suddenly "saw" everything that I had ever done and why it worked or didn't work. I saw why all disciplines worked and why none of them worked, because they all do work and none of them work.

EWJ: So, out of that moment of clarity, est was born. It came all at once, or the seeds were planted or what happened?

Erhard: It came all at once. The beginning, the middle and the end of it all happened at once. What's happening now is merely the play from it. You see, about a month after that, I got up and I did the Training. I started est. Whatever I did worked and whatever I did was whatever I did. There was no form for it, I just did it. And from the interplay between the people I was doing it with came the next step and that provided that next one. And just the weekend past, I did a Training in New York and got a new part of the Training. There was something in that Training that was never in any of the other Trainings before that.

EWJ: So you are personally doing the Training?

Erhard: Yes, I am.

EWJ: How many other people are doing it?

Erhard: Five. The only reason I am still doing the Training is because I need to keep creating the Training. And the only way I can create the Training is to do it.

EWJ: Changes are still taking place, in other words?

Erhard: Someone who had just taken the Training a year ago, took it again as a kind of "Birthday" thing and he said, "You know, either I was not here the first time or it is not like it was the first time." Of course, both of those things are true. Because we have people, who for unusual circumstances, review the Training in a month. And they say, "Wait a minute, it has all changed." The difference is that their minds get blown toward the end of the Training, but at the beginning of the Training you are using your mind. To go back and do the same Training without a mind is a totally different experience.

EWJ: What made you decide to go to India?

Erhard: If a space is clear, and if one

being is clear in that space and you are willing for that being's presence to clear the space for you, it happens. The second reason is because everybody told me about the Hindu holy men in India and I wanted to see if it was really the way they said it was. The third reason was that a guy in my business should go to India.

EWJ: What did you find out in reference to the second statement?

Erhard: That it was nothing like people said it was. I think Muktananda is the best example for me in India. I find him to be totally straight-forward, unattached to anybody's bullshit, including his own, and very clear about who he is and very clear about who other people are. And not at all desperate.

EWJ: I know you are asked about money a lot, and I am going to ask, too.

Erhard: First of all, est is legally organized as a profit corporation and in reality functions as a nonprofit organization. In other words, we are organized to take all the profits we have and spend them in various ways. The primary way in which we spend the profit is developing services gradually. In other words, the graduate spends \$200 to take the Training and gets a multiplying and increasing value from it afterwards, like seminars cost \$2. It costs us \$7 per person to put on. So if it were not for the fact that est keeps expanding, we would probably be out of business. We're constituted to spend more money per person than that person gives us.

Eventually, we will have a money-making relationship. I know exactly how we are going to do that. We've already gotten an incredible demand from the business community. Businessmen don't know what to do with all the money they've got. So we're going to give them something to do with it. And they will pay, and this is exactly what business ought to do, and are actually willing to do, if someone presents it to them intelligently. They will pay for people's well-being with the profits they make from people. Let me give you an example — Grubb-Ellis, which is a real estate firm, in the business for money, purely a profit-making organization, is excited about our coming in and doing some communications work for their people. I said, "Look, it might not make them more productive, but it will make them more human; they are going to get more aliveness out of their job." The guy said, "Wow, that's great, I've got to work here with these people."

Two things I want to say. One is that I consider it our responsibility to make this

thing as efficient and effective as possible, and I consider that to be our responsibility to people who are giving us their money, so that they get the most for their money. I want the thing run well. And it is another problem I have with a lot of disciplines in that they feel that they are spiritual, so they can let it all hang out. If they let it all hang out, they will never make it in this world and this is the world that needs it, not the other one. The other world is all right, they don't need it there.

The other thing is that the real thrust and goal of est is to put est in education. est will cease to exist somewhere along the pike. We've already begun to make inroads, we've already made good plans, we've demonstrated our effectiveness to the world, people will listen to us. We are starting to get into the education system, we have turned est in Hawaii into a non-profit incorporation; we have started a public foundation in which we put a lot of money into the whole consciousness thing — research, education, scholarly endeavors — to make the thing plausible to the public. Finally we invested in a company that supports the business aspect of a lot of other organizations; for instance, the Association for the Humanist Psychology is counselled by a company for which we provided the money. And that company's job is to counsel them on business matters. We keep our hands off, we just put our money into it.

EWJ: Is est's notion about people different from conventional therapy's notion about people?

Erhard: Yes. Traditional therapy's notion of people is developed on a scientific model in which you come from the ground up, so man's highest nature comes from working his lowest nature up. That isn't the way man was constituted in the first place. Man was constituted from his highest nature down. The est model comes from up, not down.

EWJ: You say the Training transforms people. What do you mean by that? What is the difference between that and changing people?

Erhard: If I take this thing (picks up object) and change it, I alter its form so as a matter of fact, what I actually do is reinforce it, because I add form to it. If I change it again, I add more form to it. If I change it again, I add more form to it, change it again and I add more form to it, etc. It becomes more solid and more persistent. If you take ignorance and change it, you increase ignorance. When

you change ignorance, you have ignorance pretending to be smart. That is more ignorant than ignorance itself. Transformation is the wrong word. It is actually trans-substantiation. But it is not commonly enough used, so I chose transformed, one of the synonyms for which is trans-substantiation. What is happening in est is an alteration of substance, not form. To alter substance, you have to take it through nothing. That is why est transforms people, it doesn't change them. It takes that which is through nothing.

EWJ: Why doesn't est have public advertising?

Erhard: As a demonstration of its own viability, number one. And as a matter of efficiency, number two. We do advertise, incidentally, but we never advertise to get people. For instance, if an event is sold out, we advertise that it is sold out. We put an ad in the newspaper that Swami Muktananda is sold out.

EWJ: Do people have spiritual experiences in est?

Erhard: I don't think that you and I experience, I think we non-experience. Anytime we experience, it is a spiritual experience, because experience is spiritual.

EWJ: Some people say that est is a bridge between the traditional churches and the Eastern masters. People who graduate from est usually end up with an Eastern teacher. How do you feel about that?

Erhard: I think it happens to some people. Once you know that you can play any game well, once you are guided, all nurtures. I just happen to like Eastern games, so est is a lot of that kind of thing; but it is done so that it is totally acceptable to Westerners, so they come out of Training and they begin to hear little things that come from Eastern things and they say, "Oh, that came from est, I'll look into that."

EWJ: Last question. Werner Erhard had an enlightenment experience and out of that experience grew est. Werner Erhard is also involved in it. Where is Werner Erhard going from here?

Erhard: That has to be answered in two ways, too. The real answer is nowhere. There ain't nowhere to go. That doesn't mean that I don't want to make plans. My plans could be said to be to make est as public as possible. My notion on how to do that is through the educational system. So I would like to give est up to the environment.